

Ingeborg Eliassen
The Shortcut

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Translated from the Norwegian
by Rosie Hedger

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Mummy holds a finger to her lips and makes a soft hushing sound. Maya creeps over to the sofa as quietly as a mouse to look at Grandad, who is fast asleep under a wool blanket.

‘Maya, we have to be nice and quiet,’ Mummy whispers. ‘Can you be nice and quiet?’
‘Yeeees,’ Maya whispers.

Maya and Mummy get dressed without making a single sound. They mustn’t wake Grandad, who is sleeping on the sofa. He travelled on the night train, arriving very early that the morning, and he’s very tired. He needs a little more sleep.

Let’s pretend that we can’t talk,’ Maya whispers.

Mummy nods and smiles.
Then she points at the bread.
Maya nods and Mummy cuts a slice.
Mummy points at the peanut butter.
Maya shakes her head and points at the jam.
Mummy and Maya eat in silence.

Maya can see a tiny feather stuck in Grandad’s moustache.
The feather dances as Grandad breathes in and out of his nose.

‘Fnuff,’ Grandad murmurs all of a sudden, rubbing his face.
The feather escapes from his moustache and lands on his hand.
‘Fnuff,’ Grandad murmurs once more, opening his eyes.
‘You’re taking me to nursery today,’ Maya says.
‘Hm, yes. Yes, I am,’ Grandad replies, sitting up slowly.

‘You remember where nursery is, don’t you?’ Mummy asks.
‘Yes, yes. Just past the railway station,’ Grandad replies.
‘Maya knows the way. She can show you. Isn’t that right, Maya?’ Mummy asks in her serious voice.
‘Yes!’ Maya replies. ‘First we go this way and then this way,’ she says, pointing her arm here and there.
‘It’ll be fine,’ Grandad says, smiling. He’s taken Maya to nursery before. He’ll find his way there.

Mummy puts Maya’s lunchbox in her nursery backpack, blows her a kiss and shouts goodbye, then runs out of the door to hurry to work.

‘Come and sit in your buggy, Maya, and then we’ll go.’

‘Is this the way?’ Grandad asks.
‘Yes, this way,’ Maya replies, pointing.

They come to a crossing, and Grandad stops and asks: ‘Is this the way?’
He points left.
Maya shakes her head and points straight ahead.

‘Hmm,’ Grandad replies, pushing the buggy.

‘But aren’t we supposed to go that way?’

‘No, THAT WAY!’

‘But isn’t nursery over there?’

‘YES, that way. PUSH!’

Maybe Grandad isn’t very wide awake.
He should have had a cup of coffee before they left.
He doesn’t even know where he is.

‘So is this the way?’ he asks.

‘No, we need to go this way.’

‘Stop!’ Maya says all of a sudden. They’re standing outside the pet shop window.
‘I want to look!’

They watch a mouse running round and round in a wheel, fish swimming back and forth and a bird sitting on a stick, winking at them.

Back in the buggy.
‘Isn’t this the way?’ Grandad asks.
‘Nope, that way,’ Maya says, pointing.
‘Over the bridge?’
‘Yes, over the bridge,’ Maya replies.

Grandad can’t remember going over the bridge last time they walked to nursery. But he does remember standing here once before, spitting into the river.

Grandad lifts Maya up so she can spit over the edge.
Her spit is a stroke that lands in the water and disappears.
Maya’s spit sails away with the river, out to the sea.

‘Plop!’
What was that? A fish jumping.
And another. And another.
And then it’s still once again, only water flowing smoothly.

Back into the buggy. To nursery!

‘Stop! Stop!’ Maya cries.
By a large tree they find a bird in the grass.
It’s lying perfectly still.

‘It’s dead,’ Grandad says.
‘Why is the bird dead?’ Maya asks.

‘Maybe it wasn’t looking where it was going and flew into the tree trunk.’

Grandad finds a handkerchief and wraps it around the bird. The bird’s head pops out at the top.

Grandad reaches up and places the bird on a branch high up in the tree.
The bird can rest up there.

‘We should sing something,’ Maya says.

‘Yes,’ Grandad replies, taking Maya’s hand.

‘Thank you for the birds that sing, thank you God for everything,’ Maya sings.

Grandad hums along quietly, hm hm hm hm hm hm hm, hm hm hm hm hm hm hm.

They’ve almost reached the berry house.

Maya runs up to the fence.

Grandad follows her with the buggy.

Maya looks up at the house, but there
is still no one to be seen.

They can stick their hands through the gaps in the fence
and pick the berries.

But the redcurrant bush is bare. The vines
droop down, black and dry.

‘It’s the birds,’ Grandad says, ‘they like redcurrants. They’ve gobbled them all up.’

The blackcurrant bush is bustling with berries. The birds don’t like blackcurrants.

Neither does Maya. But Grandad does.

He reaches a hand through the gap in the fence and pulls out a handful of blackcurrants.

Maya picks a warm, round blackcurrant and pops it in her mouth.

She rolls it around with her tongue.

There are apples all over the ground. Some apples are soft
and turn to brown mush under their feet. Some of them are still good.

They pick some of the good apples and place them in the buggy.

Maya and Grandad know someone who likes apples.

The horse leans over the fence and reaches down to pluck the apple out of Maya’s hand.

The horse wraps its big, brown lips gently around the apple.

But surely they must be close to nursery by now?

Maya points and Grandad pushes the buggy onwards.

Grandad stops and looks around them, but he still can’t see the nursery.

‘Aha!’ he cries suddenly. And then, once more:

‘AHA! Nursery! That’s where I arrived on the train early this morning. We need to go under here. Not
far to go now.’

They make their way through the underpass, and Maya sings co co co co co co co.

The walls of the underpass call back to her, CO CO CO CO CO CO CO, just like when Mummy takes her to nursery.

When they come out of the underpass, they stop at the kiosk.

Grandad buys a cup of coffee with a lid and a carton of juice with a straw. They sit down on a bench and Grandad drinks his coffee while Maya drinks her juice.

‘There we go!’ Grandad says, throwing his empty coffee cup in the rubbish bin.

‘There we go!’ Maya says, throwing her empty juice carton in the rubbish bin.

‘And *off* we go! Back in the buggy!’

‘I’m ready for nursery!’

And Maya points as Grandad pushes.

‘There! Nursery is there, straight ahead!’ Maya shouts.

‘Is that you, Maya?’ Birgitta asks.

‘Yes, we’re here!’ Maya replies. ‘We just needed some juice and coffee first.’

Birgitta helps Maya to take off her boots and coat and Maya takes her lunchbox out of her backpack.

Birgitta takes Maya’s hand and they run inside.

The other children are just about to sing grace.

‘Wait a minute!’ Maya cries, running back out to the steps.

‘Do you remember the way home, Grandad?’

‘Don’t you worry, Maya, I’ll be just fine.’